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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DAMASCUS 000128

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SUBJECT: "SHIA-IZATION" IN SYRIA, REGIME'S ELECTION  
CONCERNS, A-DHARI VISIT

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Michael Corbin, per 1.4 b,d.

¶1. (C) Summary: Dr. Samir al-Taqi, an advisor to the Syrian MFA, described for A/DCM February 7 growing unease in Syria about what he termed Iranian efforts at Shia-ization in the country. Most of this effort is concentrated in the northeast, with some of it linked to Iranian efforts to use investment and cultural outreach to build up a key Shiite pilgrimage destination. Concern about the phenomenon has reached the highest levels of the predominantly Alawite regime, primarily because of fears of increasing Sunni resentment. Regarding upcoming elections, al-Taqi mentioned regime nervousness and the likelihood it would try to control completely every aspect of the elections and not permit even the small amount of political space for marginally independent figures allowed in previous elections. Finally, al-Taqi claimed that the Syrians had probed visiting Iraqi Sunni religious leader Hareth al-Dhari about what they perceived as his recent efforts to secure arms and money from the Jordanians and the Saudis. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Dr. Samir al-Taqi, advisor to the Syrian MFA (and FM Mu'allim confidant), described for A/DCM February 6 an aspect of Iranian influence in Syria at present, what he termed "shia-ization," that has provoked concern at all levels of Syrian society. Al-Taqi said he has begun hearing concern expressed at "the highest levels" of the regime and the Sunni religious establishment about what he termed Iranian efforts at "Shia-ization" in the country. While there is some paranoia involved, especially at the popular level, al-Taqi insisted there were some on-the-ground realities -- and fears of a backlash -- provoking the high-level concern. The Syrian-Iranian strategic relationship, which has become much closer in the past year, obviously provides the background for these sentiments, with many Syrians muttering about whether it is in Syria's interest to be allied so closely, politically and economically, with a state that has such powerful disagreements with the U.S. and the rest of the international community.

¶3. (C) IRANIAN (AND SHIITE) INFLUENCE IRRITATING SUNNIS: Against this resentful backdrop, the Iranians have taken relatively aggressive economic and cultural approaches in Syria, noted al-Taqi. Al-Taqi said the two approaches have often combined in ways that have irritated sensibilities in Syria. To illustrate, he described a sustained Iranian effort in Raqqah, in northeastern Syria, as emblematic. In this relatively small provincial town, the Iranians, said al-Taqi have financed construction of a huge mosque complex, a large hotel, and an airport. Raqqah receives this level of attention -- and is a major site for Shia pilgrims from Iran

and elsewhere -- because an important Shia religious figure, dating back to the original schism between Sunnis and Shias, is buried there. (Comment: Other contacts, such as prominent Sunni religious leader Salah Kuftaro, when they want to vent about rising Shiite influence in Syria, have also pointed to this "huge Shiite mosque the Iranians are building" in Raqqah.) This Iranian effort to build up the prominence of the a-Raqqah as a pilgrimage site is also being used further "Shia-ization" in the area, claimed al-Taqi.

¶4. (C) Al-Taqi described the Iranians' cultural outreach efforts in Syria as equally aggressive and heavy-handed, noting that they are distributing tens of thousands of cassettes and booklets on Shiism. They are using the rubric of Sunni-Shia religious dialogue here to mount such efforts, said al-Taqi (a tactic that Kuftaro has also criticized to us.) They are also "spreading money around" in poorer villages in the northeast of Syria, especially among some of the religious sheikhs, in attempts to encourage the conversion of Sunnis to the Shia faith. Like most of our other interlocutors who raise this subject, al-Taqi could offer few details about such proselytizing.

¶5. (C) REGIME CONCERN NOTED: Al-Taqi described these Iranian efforts as extremely dangerous to the Syrian regime, noting that he and others are insisting that such efforts be stopped. When asked why they posed a danger, al-Taqi noted the heavily minority character of the Syrian regime, dominated by Alawites, long-identified -- and despised -- by Sunnis as descendants of quasi-Shiite heretics. The current Iranian effort has irritatingly rubbed up against this Syrian-Sunni resentment of the Alawites. In addition, according to al-Taqi, the regime has a history of putting in

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key positions a few Syrian Shiites (a very small minority group in Syria, representing less than one percent of the population), whose religious backgrounds are not well-known, and passing them off as Sunnis, to give the regime less of a minority character, while avoiding placing too many Sunnis in key positions. Al-Taqi asserted that Ba'ath Party National Security Bureau chief (and key senior intelligence officer) Hisham Ikhtiyar is a Shiite posing as a Sunni (an assertion other contacts have made to us in the past). He also noted that he suspects that the current head of the General Intelligence Directorate, General Ali Mamluk, may be of Shiite origins, although Mamluk is identified publicly as a Sunni, and used by the regime to show that a Sunni is entrusted with one of its most sensitive intelligence positions. (Comment: Adding possible weight to this statement is the fact that we have heard repeatedly that al-Taqi reports to Mamluk regularly and is "protected" because of that relationship.)

¶6. (C) REGIME NERVOUSNESS ABOUT UPCOMING ELECTIONS: Regarding upcoming elections, al-Taqi mentioned regime nervousness and the likelihood it would try to control completely every aspect of the elections and not permit even the small amount of political maneuvering and political space for marginally independent figures allowed in previous elections. Al-Taqi outlined several areas of regime concern: Turnout for the presidential referendum, in which Bashar al-Asad will run unopposed, could be embarrassingly low; while the regime can falsify the numbers, it remains concerned that too low a turnout could indicate growing anti-regime sentiment. In addition, some newly elected MP,s could raise questions about the fact that Asad is running unopposed, highlighting an embarrassingly undemocratic anachronism. Because of that concern, there has been some discussion about finding a legal way to let the current Parliament take care of this constitutionally required duty of "submitting" Asad,s name to the people for a referendum early (i.e., before scheduled parliamentary elections), rather than letting a new Parliament muck around with the task.

¶7. (C) RISING SECTARIAN SENTIMENT IN BAATH PARTY?: There is also concern in ruling circles about the growing sectarian character evident in voting, even among the Ba,ath Party. Al-Taqi noted that much more pronounced sectarian character has been evident in the voting for leadership positions in key Ba,ath Party-dominated professional associations over the past year. Finally, there is concern that competition among regime elements, especially among the security services, could knock out some regime-friendly figures and allow a few "undesirable" candidates to win parliamentary election.

¶8. (C) PLENTY OF WAYS TO CHEAT: Despite these concerns, al-Taqi said the regime had plenty of ways to cheat in order to shape the precise outcome. The regime would expend great effort to shape "official" and "unofficial" candidate slates and dole out money to help in "approved" campaigns. He noted that there are no voter registration lists showing where voters should vote, opening the way for multiple voting in different districts by the same voters. There is no "independent" oversight at the critical stage of transporting ballot boxes to vote-counting centers and similarly no real oversight of the vote-counting. Hence the regime would have significant opportunities to control the outcome of the vote counting.

¶9. (C) STOPPING IRAQI REFUGEES: Regarding the SARG,s recent efforts to restrict the number of Iraqis entering Syria, al-Taqi noted that the SARG is concerned by the numbers and what it views as the increasingly alarming spillover effect of the conflict in Iraq. But it also wants to demonstrate its importance and now "wants to be paid" for all its support for the refugees. He mentioned some SARG efforts to seek donor money from the Japanese.

¶10. (C) HARETH AL-DHARI VISIT: Regarding the now week-long visit of Iraqi Sunni Sheikh Hareth al-Dhari to Syria, al-Taqi noted that the Syrians had invited Dhari to probe the success of what they believed were his efforts to secure assistance from the Jordanians and the Saudis. The Syrians pressed him to limit those efforts, asserted al-Taqi. When asked what Dhari wanted from the Saudis and the Jordanians, al-Taqi responded "arms and money." He claimed that he had heard from contacts that the Jordanians had expressed readiness to

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help Dhari, while the Saudis had responded much more cautiously because of concerns about their large minority Shiite minority population.

¶11. (C) COMMENT: While al-Taqi's comments on "Shia-ization" present few facts about this very controversial topic, they are interesting, casting light on regime concern about this phenomenon. Whether the on-the-ground realities here really justify the hand-wringing is unclear, but to a significant degree, the regime concern that al-Taqi alludes to is not in response to the realities but to the popular, often paranoid, reaction of Syrians to developments (and rumors), especially among Sunnis.

CORBIN